

# The Call to Arms

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Summary: A Spartan-II was offered a pardon from active duty pursuant to UNSC Sole Survivor Protocol. She accepted, starting a new life on Earth, but colossal obligation lies ahead that will lead her to disobey this humanitarian mandate. For when the Covenant strike at her homeworld, Maria's darkest instincts take over.

## 1. Prologue

**\*\*0530 Hours, October 20, 2552 (Military Calendar)/  
>Sol System, D77-TC Special Operations Pelican Dropship  
<em>Blackbird<br>\_Low Earth Orbit\*\***

Maria stood at the edge of the heavens.

Awestruck, she took in its powerful, placid beauty. The world below seemed still.

Had there not been this critical mission, she'd stand here for hours just taking in the splendor of mother earth. Her ionosphere resided just under Maria's feet. The special operations pelican drop ship hovered in low orbit. The colossal sphere down below beckoned as if pulling her in. She slowly traced her sights from the depths of the oceans all the way up to the zenith of this perfect, azure orb. The blues and the whites twirled together, leading up to a dim glow at the sunlit horizon—and then: the inky black of the far beyond.

It was surreal. She felt humbled, hollow and weightless. The slow rush inside her settled and she was one with space, in tune with her surroundings. She looked around to take in its majesty once more. Coming into focus against the deep blues was the deck plate of the pelican. It was nothing in comparison to the planet, an insignificant little piece of metal. And she stood upon its edge. She stared into earth with no thought in her mind as if earth persuaded her that she needed none. She realized just how small the human race actually was.

A crackle of static washed over her ears as the audio emitters in her prototype armor helmet resonated for the first time. Crystal clear voices echoed into her consciousness, so incongruous to the quiet stillness of space.

She snapped back into reality.

"\_Blackbird arriving at the window in threeâ€|twoâ€|"

><em>\_"Telemetry signals green. All signals clear."

>"Confirm drop bay open."<br>"Roger."

>"Preparing test and catalogue of A-12-121 MJOLNIR Mark VI

Armor."<br>"Spartan Zero-Six-Two approaching rear of craft\_."

It was the real-time full-duplex feed of mission control down below, tracking her every move.

"\_Soldier, you ready to visit beautiful Songnam for a little exercise?" \_said an old voice thick with Korean accent.

Maria considered the question. The Test Director sure put it to her leniently, as if she had a choice. Technically, she did. OT&E never tolerated safety risks, especially ones involving extreme high-altitude free-falls.

She would have a choice and it comforted her. She hadn't seen any kind of action since the fall of Jericho VII, though deep down she began to push the illusion of choice away from her mind. She was and always would be a Spartan whose luxuries were seldom. She couldn't deny her past. There was no escaping this call of duty today. No matter what danger befell her, she felt compelled to complete this dropâ€"and for a number of reasons. She hadn't known what the rush of combat felt like in many years following her discharge from active duty, and surely pride was part of her reasoning as she had volunteered for this duty. She couldn't pull out nowâ€"what would that say of Spartans?

But more than being representative, she remembered the feeling...

She remembered what selfless service was, what it was like to devote everything to a common objective for the good of others.

She deliberated all the likely outcomes of this test sortie. Above risk and danger and death was Spartansâ€"her brothers and sistersâ€"empowered with the greatest augmentation of all time. A modern marvel wartime engineering. The successful evaluation of this exercise would prove that MJOLNIR Mark VI was ready to be fielded by the leanest, meanest, greenest soldiers the universe had ever seen.

The Naval Captain's question surged back into her mind.

There was utterly no reservation in her voice. It was time to perform her soldierly duty.

"Affirmative, sir."

"\_Then commence drop on my mark...\_"

She took in the barren vista of cold vacuum once again. It offered her no quarter and seemingly ushered her towards earth, forcing her to complete this mission.

"â€|\_MARK!\_"

She jumped.

## 2. An Appointment of Ethics

\*\*\_Five years earlier...\_\*\*

\*\*0930 Hours, March 2, 2547 (Military Calendar)/  
><strong>\*\*Sol System, Earth, UNSC HighComm Facility Bravo-6\*\*

In a SCIF deep under the ground of Sydney, Australia, Vice Admiral Parangosky sat cross-legged and tight-lipped.

Her features had the potential to intimidate beserking Brutes, so stern she appeared. As if the mere sight of the rank she wore wasn't awe-inducing enough. Even some above her may have thought twice before crossing this particular senior officer, as well-connected as she was.

Across the oak conference table was Admiral Francais Jones, one rank her senior, commanding officer of Bravo-6 and arguably the most entrenched man in the UNSC. A man with fingers on everything and decades of military experience, there were none yet to contradict him on matters of his purview. In cyberspace, Jones and Parangosky were often times attached at the hip with so many overlapping fields of responsibility and authority. This was the first time they'd met in person. He stared back at his subordinate for a minute after she'd entered the room, knowing something had gone awry.

"I understand you reside in the Navy Special Weapons Committee and you're on oversight for some of our projects. This face-to-face you requested obviously means there's something important on your mind. You can speak freely here."

"Frankly, sir, we're looking at the first major internal crisis since Ex-Colonel Robert Watts defected." she replied. "A major public affairs nightmare."

"Tell me."

"Some self-righteous Lieutenant decided to apply Navy regulation to one of our Spartans."

"â€|Go on."

"Spartan Zero-Six-Two had a sister in the program.  
Sheâ€"

"â€"Excuse me, did you say \_sister\_? We recruit siblings?"

Parangosky shifted in her seat and carefully deliberated how she'd word her next sentence.

The word 'recruit' was a very loose term in the Spartan program. Spartans weren't exactly recruited. If that was the case, it would imply that they had a choice in the matter of being inducted into the Spartan-II program, which is exactly what they were denied in the first place: choice. They were abducted at a very young age, forced to abandon their childhood existence and live a life of hardship and uncertainty, morphing by rigor into the most deadly and effective combat unit the universe had ever known. The only choice they were ever given was how best to kill an enemy of the UNSC, whether it be Covenant intruders or colonial dissidents from yester-years.

"Doctor Halsey apparently overlooked any blowback that could occur from conscripting them. And we weren't officially at war, sir. Many indoctrination standards weren't a consideration at the time."

"Well, it sure is now that I know. Go on, Vice Admiral."

"She was killed in the Atlas Moon campaign." Parangosky drew a deep breath before breaking the news: "This Lieutenant invoked the Sole Surviving Daughter protocol. PERSCOM is outprocessing her as we speak."

Jones' eyes went wide.

"\_A leak, you're telling me?" Jones instantly realized his reputation and perhaps his very career was on the line upon Parangosky briefing him of this new development. Worse, the integrity of the Spartan program was now at stake. He was visibly stirred.

He was placed in direct oversight of the program, shared jointly with other department heads after the fall of Jericho VII, when the human War effort had taken a turn for the worse. A major UNSC staging area, the Lambda Serpentis System was the gateway between the outer colony and inner. When that galactic region was overtaken by the Covenant in 2535, it was clearly only a matter of time before mankind's enemy would swarm the inner colonies. The death toll trends had spiked since then and remained at a perpetual high as the Covenant further encroached human territory. Long ago at the creation of the SPARTAN-II program, Admiral Jones avowed to the leadership of ONI/Section II that any news of its super-soldiers dying would never pass beyond his office. The military propaganda machine wasn't solely the burden of Section Two after all; it was a shared responsibility of everyone in the know of the clandestine project.

If such news ever decompartmentalized and leaked even to other military personnel outside of ONI, the consequences could be earth-shattering. The news would inevitably carry far outside of military control. News of dead Spartans to the public...

It was understood throughout the Milky Way that 'Spartans never die'. It was perhaps the single most effective crutch the UNSC provided its star systems.

"Who, \_exactly\_, did this?" he tilted forward and beared his elbows down on the table.

She had the name and rank memorized. "A liaison officer we embedded in the project: Lieutenant Elias Haverson."

"How does a low-ranking officer accomplish something like this?" Admiral Jones asked incredulously, almost laughing. He reclined his chair backwards. "ONI Directive Nine-Hundred Thirty, Vice Admiral. How did he bypass it?"

"That's still undetermined, sir. We'll have to question him to find out."

"Moot point, now. This Haverson is probably not too far out of the Academy, am I right? Young, inexperienced."

"Sir, I believe...yes, sir. He's got four years time in service."

Jones shook his head. "Well, whoever reviewed his records prior to this assignment apparently thought he was the ideal candidate. I guess there wasn't a more qualified major or colonel."

"Running short on personnel these days, Admiral."

"But Haverson's task was not a simple one. A job like this requires discretion. Balancing truth and lies, relaying specific information to the public at specific times. His job needed a cunning officer at the helm, cunning but political. Have we picked the wrong man for the job?"

She didn't respond.

"Margaret, I'd like to thank you for your sense of urgency and forthcomingness in this problem."

"Don't think anything of it, sir. It's been my reluctant duty to look after this program."

"What do you mean by that? Records have shown that Spartansâ€"

"â€"Records have shown that significant costs have been devoted to maintaining their secrecy, sir."

"Well, that's true for almost every program we administer."

"I was referring to the foundational impetus that the program began with. Kidnapping children, cloning them in order to lull their unsuspecting parents, and experimenting on these helpless kids. Do you have kids?"

"I have three daughters."

Parangosky waved off and sighed. "Anyways, don't get me started."

"Well, the fact that you've come forward now rather than trying to take this on alone gives me hope. What's done is done, Margaret. Halsey assumed a lot of liberty with her funding and unfortunately this is where we're at. However, this program has matured and it has produced irrefutable results. We'll deal with ethics at a later time. We can't get lost in the weeds now. This is very serious." Jones suddenly realized what had to be done. "We have to nip this in the bud before it gets out in the open." He shifted in his seat and

whispered emphatically, "We need top-of-the-line damage control. Every personelst that has any knowledge of her and her sister needs to be interrogated and made well aware of the consequences of unlawful disclosure, and you have to devote routine surveillance on their every action. You have to scrub any files of her or her sister floating around in cyberspace. Offices and homes will be ransacked. Eavesdropping bugs will be planted. People will be sanitized in one way or another. And I don't care how many people it takes, I don't care how much time it takes, I don't care how much money it takes...you close off this leak!"

She sat straighter and tried to look as presentable as possible. "Sir, it's already out in the open. I'm afraid too many people know, now. I've ran numerous assessments myself. We need to look beyond preventative measures and plan for exposure."

"What would you suggest we do?"

"It would ultimately be your call, sir, but exposure is not the end. There may be a strong possibility we could profit from this. Think if we released some of their successful mission details to the enlisted corps. It would surely have a positive effect."

"Which would also allow for potential disclosures of a \_lot \_of sensitive information." Jones interjected.

"I can assure you every product published will be thoroughly sanitized. I'll task a small army of editors and analysts to ensure every derivative is leak-proof. We just want to show the troops how effective Spartans are on the battlefield. The covert ops can be omitted. I think this is a good opportunity, sir."

"You'd assume full accountability, Vice Admiral?"

"There's little else we can do short of a miracle."

Admiral Jones glared through her, though not necessarily at her. He suddenly took on a calm air, realizing her ideas had potential in light of losing positive control over the Program's secrecy. He leaned back in his rich, leather chair and whipped out a cigar from a metal case. Staring at it thoughtfully, he set the case down, balancing the shiny tin perfectly on the table's edge with no sound. He then brought the finely rolled leaf to bear, sniffing it gingerly.

His eyes met hers. "Then we'll \_make\_ a miracle."

\_\*\*One week laterâ€¦\*\*|\*\*\_

Lieutenant Elias Haverson just entered the lobby of the mightiest military fortress in the known universe.

Informally know as The Hive, this was the focal point of all Earth's military affairs including the home to the mysterious and all-seeing Office of Naval Intelligence.

This was the mouth of the monster known as the UNSC.

Accomplishing only a few steps into the well-lit ambiance, he was met by a trio of armed guards, two of them with military working

dogsâ€”trained to snap limbs on command. They eyed him cunningly.

Conscious not to make any sudden movements, he reached into his pocket and produced a common access card with an outstretched arm. After visual inspection from one of the stone-faced sentries, he was waved on to swipe it into a nearby machine. Every day, he'd see the same faces, but the guards never offered any reply to his attempts at chit-chat past the obligatory 'hello' or 'good morning'. He'd given up pressing for more than formalities many months ago.

Haverson hadn't seen the dogs in a few weeks. He knew that the level of security was slightly elevated today. For what reason, he couldn't be sure. All of ONI was heavily compartmentalized, its members tight-lipped. Was this just another random antiterrorism measure? Or was there a specific underlying motive for heightened paranoia that HighComm Facility Bravo-6 had been known for? The only reason a visitor would be challenged upon entry is if the Entry Controllers feared insertion of a virus into their Public Key Infrastructure, intentional or unintentional. Maybe the forward intel agencies tipped off the right person to an imminent threat. He was sure there were no viruses contained within his access card, though; he scanned for it prior to leaving for home yesterday.

He swiped it with confidence as the guards maintained composure, their weapons hoisted across their Kevlar-clad chests at Port Arms.

Eli didn't feel riled up by the heightened security presence. He was quite used to it by now even though he was just a cadet in training a few years ago. This was all simply an addendum to his morning routine, still easy for him to maintain cool. While waiting for varification of his credentials, he regarded the massive interior and marveled at its decadence. A glance behind him revealed the broader side of the colonnade which was hewn from solid marble itself. Even the atrium floor was a jet-black obsidian, always polished and always giving Eli the disconcerting sensation he'd just walked over a frozen sea of black ice. He'd fall through one of these days if he stared hard enough. He then caught a hazy reflection of himself in the abyss below his feet: a white service dress, glossed shoes almost as lustrous as the floor, and an already impressive rainbow rack of ribbons on his chest. Eli shook his head. In his opinion, HighComm's splendor and endless novelty stole from its own functionality. Oh, the money that could've been saved on more useful things.

As if to accentuate more of Bravo-6's effortless influence of power and grandeur, the spacious lobby appeared more like a five-star resort upon first impression to the untrained eye. The high-vaulted ceiling was welcoming. Hanging baskets of exotic flora dotted the periphery near ballistic-grade windows. He leveled his gaze further outwards, still waiting. The walls were albino marble, a polarizing contrast against the nothing-dark floor. They towered ever higher as they tapered towards the apexâ€”a clear pyramidal oculus infused within a polycarbonate mesh, a beautiful sight to behold. Many didn't know that it was capable of withstanding an immediate nuclear blast of immense yield. It was a rather comforting prospect for him knowing the work environment subsisted in total safety, arguably the safest place on the entire planet.

The people swarmed the lobby like worker bees, laborious in their

daily tasks. General's aides zipped through the droning din with fresh data and fresh coffee in their hands. Bureaucrats in suits hovered closely by their military liaisons. Solitary commanders with more important agendas paced briskly across the expanse to their destinations. Eli knew that the Hive staff were far too busy to ever partake in the frivolities that surrounded them—the coffee bars, massage parlors, shopping kiosks. Just more, untouchable quirks often overlooked due to lack of necessity in such an industrious workspace. People had their priorities. And priorities inside Bravo-6 were of the gravest nature to the UNSC and indeed the human race.

Haverson snapped back to his immediate proximity as the electronics by his side chimed a friendly tone. An LED pulsed green.

He was verified and authorized to proceed.

The guards stepped aside with no word and gestured him further inward.

Next was the metal detector/residue sniffer. He proceeded under this massive arch, which seemed more like a shiny, twisted torpedo. It bounded right out of the floor, twisted like a dolphin frozen in mid-breach, and then plunged back into the depths below. Sleek and otherworldly. Still, the need for it was justified regardless of its puzzling artform. He looked above to the underside of the towering apex as he crossed under, only now remembering that a metal key was still in his pocket, the one he'd received last evening. It was too late now; he'd already crossed the threshold of the detector. He prayed the guards wouldn't flinch too hard when the device sounded off, but much to his surprise the expected reaction didn't come from the machine. Nothing unusual, no sound at all. He was clear once again.

He glanced over either shoulder at the guards as he proceeded further on. They had already forgotten about him, focused on the next prospective visitor to the Hive.

Up ahead was a chrome turnstile that buzzed promptly as he neared. Awaiting at a shoulder-height desk just beyond was an attractive young receptionist. She was blonde with her hair up in a bun, a helpful smile. He offered his access card along with a curt smile.

"Briefing room nine." she said politely.

"Thank you." he replied.

He walked on and stole a deep breath. He had made it through the Gauntlet. Nothing changed, and rightly so. Anyone, no matter who it was, had nothing but partial access to larger sectors while here. One sector at a time, all the time. They always knew where you'd be. They always knew where to find you. From the moment you passed through the exterior, you were observed and catalogued—from the lowliest janitor to the installation commander themselves. \_No matter,\_ Haverson thought. He only had one matter of business to attend to at this time. He'd see it done, then go home and relax. It was overcast today in Sydney, a day well-spent on the beach. A couple of cold beers, the sun, the surf and the sand, and the company of his wife and children. It would be a perfect day.



Eli strode across the polished rock expanse, mindful not to look down again. He allowed a casual glance to the right where the facility's most luxurious rest area was in the center, complete with a coffee bar, plush seating arrangements, and all manner of fattening pick-me-ups housed behind windows of curved glass. There was no time for indulgence this morning. The elevator beckoned in the distance, growing in size as he approached. Brushed aluminum doors and chrome buttons on a marble wall were more style than substance. He depressed one and the elevator opened on queue with a chime. He stepped in.

There were many buttons—many choices. Rather than choose one by his own volition, he instead settled on reaching into his pocket and fished for the key. These were only issued on a temporary basis when they needed you in a certain place at a certain time. Today would mark his first occurrence wielding the dreaded Key of Fate, as they were called. He'd heard plenty rumors of them during idle chatter in the office. Miss your deadline by one minute, find yourself in the wrong place, and Bravo-6 security forces would descend on you from all directions. It was apparently invisible to metal detectors, allowing you to get to your place of business on time and unscathed. But use it falsely, wittingly or unwittingly, and you were cruising for a bruising. He prayed to himself the morning would just progress static-free with no stress.

His fingers brushed up against the jagged teeth. He pinched it by the hilt and brought it to bear. Stenciled on the silver anodized material was the ONI logo: A proud bird of prey perched atop an all-seeing eye, personified paranoia typical of the spook division that he worked for. He took a breath, inserted the key and gave it a twist. The elevator silently descended.

Eli felt the boxcar seamlessly pickup speed, giving almost no hint of inertia. Its rate of descent might very well have been just below freefall. Any Helljumper would swear by it. The sounds of the downdraft it made wooshing into the plenums of every floor below it suggested such. For a whole minute he fell—through two kilometers of solid granite and a globally-hardened, EMP-resistant bowl the size of a small country. The only indicator of him reaching his destination was a chime, then the parting of the doors. He looked up: even the floor marker was blacked out so as not to discern the exact depth.

"Damned spooks." he mumbled.

He froze for an instant at the threshold to the corridor. They were probably listening right now. Every square meter was under surveillance, he knew that. But more, he was ONI. Despite his reservations, he was a part of the society. Part of this internal affairs branch, this culture within a culture. He resumed again, stepping beyond the doorsill and setting foot into the only corridor stemming directly from the elevator. Straight, narrow, and the only choice. He hated not having a choice. It was a wonder he'd even made it this far in the armed service, but it had its perks.

His footsteps were muffled on thick carpet and even denser rock beneath. Come to think of it...there was no sound at all in the hallway except that which he generated. Not even the distant hum of a climate control unit. It made the journey to the door at the end long and confining. The distant portal grew in size unnaturally, slowly.

Quickening his pace didn't seem to matter. Maybe he was on edge. Maybe the feeling of a hundred eyes all around him was just his fanciful imagination at work. After all, he had no idea why he was here this day. But he finally reached a door after what seemed like minutes.

He'd been summoned here by the powers that be. For what reason, he did not know. Ultimately, you didn't have to know. You just obeyed.

He slid his card once more and the doors parted.

...And there, seated at a conference table were two Admirals.

He snapped to attention and marched forth. Door closing behind him, he halted two paces off from the highest rankingâ€”a full admiralâ€”and threw up a crisp salute.

"Sir, Lieutenant Haverson reporting as ordered."

The Admiral said nothing.

From the side, Vice Admiral Margret Parangosky cleared her throat. "Lieutenant Elias Haverson, do you know why you've been summoned here today?"

This was usually the point at which some one would say 'at ease'.

But it didn't come.

Haverson remained locked up like a statue. "No ma'am." he replied.

"It's a question of ethics, isn't it?"

"Ma'am?"

"You initiated the process to pardon a Spartan from active duty recently." The Vice Admiral's voice was so flat and raspy that one might've thought they were listening in on a ninety year old, as if her windpipe was filled with all the smoke of a late night jazz club.

"Yes ma'am," he replied firmly, "I did."

"Tell me," she said, leaning forward, "what made you think you had the authority to issue such an order?"

"Ma'am, UNSCDF Instruction 1315.15, Special Separation Policies for Survivorship, ma'am."

"Really?" she smiled.

Amusement piqued on Parangosky's whipped face. And though Eli only caught the change from the corner of his eye, it scared him half to paralyzation. In this setting, a smiling admiral only meant one thing: you were about to enter a world of regret and punishment. You didn't have to be a bright junior officer to know this, you only needed natural instinct.

He felt as though his blood temperature dropped about ten degrees, and a bead of sweat trickled down his back. These sensations reminded him of childhood, the feeling he got when he realized he did something terribly wrong. The guilt and shame. Only now, the stakes were much higher. Eli didn't dare swallow the cold lump of fear stuck in his throat while they were looking. "Yes ma'am." he managed.

"And what exactly does this Instruction specify?"

He answered straightforwardly. "It specifies that if all siblings of a uniformed member are KIA, POW, or otherwise MIA, then said soldier can be pardoned from active duty under the United Nations Family Hardship Act of 2526."

Parangosky's face suddenly contorted. "Spartans are her only family!" she shouted, the sound of the voice terribly abrasive. "She is a weapon system, Lieutenant! With a three-digit serial number!"

Haverson nearly lost his balance and involuntarily rocked back and forth on his heels like a punching bag, struggling to contain himself in her outburst. His closed fists filled with sweat and oozed between his fingers, but he still kept his bearing, kept his arms pinned at his sides and looked straight ahead like a good lieutenant would, fearing he'd falter if he met the Vice Admiral's gaze.

Admiral Jones stood up from where he was seated and walked towards Haverson, calmly and intently as if strolling along on a quiet day in the park or a beach. At first glance, the Admiral slowly gaiting towards Haverson seemed like the more level-headed of the two, his facial features certainly more reserved than hers. \_Maybe he's just playing the good cop, \_Haverson mused. Nevertheless, this was a full Admiral, which made Haverson realize the situation had just gotten worse. Thusly, in Haverson's mind, the lax body language of this high-ranking individual began to come off even more malicious than Parangosky's venomous voice. He stepped right next to Haverson's side and eyed him up and down.

Haverson still maintained, gaze straight ahead.

"Tell me, Lieutenant, what justification did you have in doing this? What made you think that a Spartan was eligible for such leave?"

Eli replied, "Sir, she's wears the same uniform as you or I, bound by the same rules and regulations as anyone else. And I saw no language in the Instruction that exempted her from it."

Admiral Jones sighed. "You have no idea what you just did, Lieutenant Haverson. You...did the right thing. But you did the right thing according to your own, small mind. Those Instructions were never intended to be applied to programs such as Section Three's. The soldier you just pardoned has not been conditioned for this. She's a killing machine, and that Spartan was needed in the War with all the rest of her kind. Not only did you weaken the UNSC today, but you just helped in squandering humanity's last hope. Unfortunately for all of us this incident is no longer isolated and has crossed ONI's boundaries, so your decision is now irrevocable." The Admiral regarded Eli one last time before strolling back to his seat. "What will she do now, start a family?"

Parangosky hovered at the edge of her seat in the background, eager for some junior officer blood. Not only was it Haverson's ass on the line, but her's as well. She gestured towards Haverson still standing. "What should we do with this one?"

Jones thought for a moment upon retaking his seat at the head of the table, exacting another whiff of his sweet cigar. His eyes leveled at Haverson's. "I know exactly what to do." He didn't bother to look at Haverson again as he navigated through a datapad. "At ease, Lieutenant."

Eli let his arms go loose and unclenched his achy fists, then assumed the position of Parade Rest. Another moment and he took in a subtle breath through the nose and let it out smoothly, unclenching his jaw.

Admiral Jones resumed, "You are very resourceful. Maybe not too bright, but very resourceful. I have just the assignment for you." He thumbed further over the datapad's touchscreen, then stopped rather suddenly. "You are being reassigned to Reach, effective immediately. You will report to a Commander Jacob Keyes there and remain under his direct supervision until he deems otherwise. He's going to sharpen you up by the numbers. He's gonna take you back to basics, Lieutenant. Hell, you might even learn how to think before you act. Is it correct that you're coming up for promotion this cycle?"

"Yes sir."

"Consider yourself denied in advance. You should expect to hold the rank of lieutenant for far longer than standard because frankly you don't deserve a position that demands anything more than fetching coffee for the man. And, before you get there, you will find this Spartan Zero-Six-Two and advise her of her new duty. You are charged with the timely execution of her separation from the UNSC. And so help me God, if you fail to accomplish either task, I'll see to it that you do hard time on some shit-hole frontier world. I'll make it my mission to see you suffer. You get me, boy?"

"Yes, sir. Understood." Haverson bit his lower lip as he spoke again, "Sir, might I ask one question before we're through here?"

"Speak."

"My new assignment to Reach...is it an accompanied tour?"

"Put it this way," Jones replied, cocking his head to one side, "if you prove to me that you can handle your shit for the first year, then you can arrange for your family to join you at Reach. On your own wages. So save up your credits. Now get out of my sight."

Haverson snapped to attention. "Sir! Yes sir!"

Haverson saulted the pair of Admirals, who didn't bother to return the time-honored gesture of respect. He knew perfectly well that was coming to him. Instantly, he about faced and disappeared through the door, never to return to Earth again.

### 3. Honorable Discharge

\*\*0520 Hours, July 6, 2547 (Military Calendar)/\*\*\*\*

><strong>\*\*Epsilon Eridani System, Planet Reach  
>Airspace above Reach Military Complexâ€”Camp Hathcock<strong>

To Maria, it seemed as though the clouds rose to meet the Pelican's altitude.

She stared outward through the cockpit windscreen. The view was diminutive from where she was seated in the rear hold. She glanced about the insides once again, noting the hard seating surfaces and the exposed wire harnesses and high-pressure tubes, all of them smothered with olive-drab paint, and the high-pitched moan of the thrusters channeled into the framework. These next moments might very well be the last experiences of a Pelican flight. Maria thought it odd. She'd been passenger so many times before.

Bright, warming sunlight lanced into the troop bay along with another chapter of life as the Pelican carrying her received authorization to descend upon the Reach Military Complex, though this was not another training exercise or briefing for the next mission. This was her last mission.

\_Spartans get the mission accomplished, \_she'd heard a Marine officer once say. The Major used that line in an effort to shore up the dwindling morale of a besieged colonial regiment Maria found herself augmenting more than a decade ago. \_Show some respect and learn something from her.\_

Times were different then. Spartans were by-and-large figures of legend. Distant, unseen champions of the UNSC, the news of their victorious engagements against Covenant forces were made widely known after their existence had been declassified. People witnessing their existence prior-to were compelled to endorse ONI non-disclosure statements to maintain that secrecy. Those furtive measures held for a markedly long time.

The Pelican carrying such precious cargo slanted her nose down on a pre-set glide path. Ahead was Spartan-062's destination: the concrete city of Camp Hathcock perched atop a vast, fertile valley. Flanking the plain were two, snow-capped peaks of the Highland Range that encompassed Reach's Northernmost Viery Territory. It all appeared as a small town from this vantage. Unarmored, she flipped a few strands of her dark hair away from her eyes.

"The formalities won't begin until tomorrow."

That was Lieutenant Haverson, her chaperone and coordinator for all the affairs taking place. He was also the one responsible for everything leading up to this point.

He regarded her with a genuine scrutiny and a curt smile.

"When we touchdown, I'll show you to your quarters. Ignore the press and just smile at them. Don't let them come between us. Just stick by my side for now."

He was like most officers Maria had come into contact with during her military service: rigid, by the book, surveying troops as well as long-term impacts of their decisions. He nodded again, then went into the particulars of some instructions he'd received on a datapad while en route. He thumbed through the list of procedures and ceremonial events inevitably to play out.

Maria looked on again. She could no longer see the ground beneath the Pelican, now placed into a hover above the flightline. Seconds later, it descended vertically, the downward fire of the thrusters parting and pluming-down massive currents of air that sent small cavitations into the lower hull. The aircraft swiveled about and rotated the main entrance of the installation into view, now at eye level. The skids gently sank into tarmac and the superstructure groaned for a fraction of a second before fully settling, then the thrusters spooled down.

The tail ramp lowered and Lieutenant Haverson unbuckled his restraint harness. He got up, smoothed out wrinkles on his service dress with one, smooth stroke of his right palm and walked out, marching down the incline. Maria hastened her step to meet his side.

Once the two rounded the aft corner of the vessel, a miniature army of people and camera-drones rushed up to span the gap in between. She regarded her escort with a sidelong glance. He glanced back and smiled. "This is it, Maria, your big day. You'll be on your way soon."

\* \* \*

><p><em><strong>The next day...<strong>\_

Maria couldn't remember the last time she'd worn the white service dress uniform.

She remembered it to be a costly affair in terms of comfort and function: always tight and crisp and restrictive, accentuating the wearer's form and fit. Everything had been prepared for her. All the garments were pressed and hung neatly. On the nightstand was a networked holo-display that fetched the most recent UNSC dress & appearance regulations, detailing every aspect of how this ensemble was to be worn and the exact placement of campaign ribbons and achievement medals and specialty devices. After ten minutes of reading, she'd gotten the ribbon rack situated perfectly and was now moving onto the lustrous metal pieces that were to be situated over the right side of her blouse.

There were so many of them, she'd only now noticed. PERSCOM must've done scrupulous analysis of all the missions since her induction into the UNSC. There were more bronze stars on each ribbon than she could count in an instant. And the amount of ribbons currently on display spanned nearly ten rows high, taking up all the real estate on her coat's left side. She smiled inwardly at the sight of it in the mirror ahead and checked her gig line.

Just then, she caught sight of one particular accouterment in her reflection. It was bright and stood out among others, seeming foreign. That one she never truly earned: the Purple Heart, that ribbon signifying to the human race that this Spartan was WIA and no longer fit for duty. She'd been told by Haverson to keep the

explanations subtle and brief upon query. Something about a nervous system overload due to the close proximity she'd been in relation to a cache of Covenant plasma grenades. Boren's Syndrome, he'd said. An acute, almost lethal dosage for an instant that would wreak havoc on her for the rest of her days. She felt slightly ashamed going along with this cover story, but it was for another great cause, some policy directive that ONI would maintain at all costs.

That cause was the reason for all this: to maintain the aphorism that 'Spartans never die', that her little sister had never perished in battle. If only it were true.

Before she could reminisce, the door chimed and parted. Maria spun around to greet Lieutenant Haverson and welcomed him in with a salute. He returned it standing in the threshold, then entered.

"So," he said, looking her up and down, "everything ship-shape?"

"Aye, sir." She shifted her stance casually. "I feelâ€¦fancy."

"Well, I promise this is the last time the Navy's gonna make you look fancy."

The good Lieutenant glanced about the room. It was nothing special: stately and petite and affording just enough accommodations for a middle-ranked individual to have a few nights' stay.

"So this is it, huh?" She said, catching his attention. She was much taller than him, though he was notably short as average height for a man goes. "My last day in the UNSC, sir?"

"Do you regret accepting your release from active duty?"

Maria appeared to have the answer readily presentable, but she hesitated.

"If you made enough stink about it, we could get this whole process reversed. But this is your one and only shot at leaving. Turn it down now, and you can never rescind that decision."

"No, I haven't changed my mind. I want a normal life and a family. Butâ€¦"

Haverson smiled, "But the UNSC will always have a special place in your heart?"

"Basically."

"I understand, Oh-Six-Two." he nodded.

"It's nice to have options, though. I wanted to thank you, sir, for giving me that option."

"Don't thank me, I was just doing my job."

"You could've let it pass."

"It would've been wrong to, although some influential people that I work with tend to disagree."

"What should I do if I'm old and tired and regret comes around?"

"Well, don't worry about that." he said, extending a data chit. "If you ever get bored, look me up and I'll arrange some action for you. You ever thought about joining the Reserves?"

This perked Maria's interest.

"I can do that?"

"If you want. Why not? You served just like everyone else and you're entitled to keep serving if you wish."

"That'd be great, sir."

"Yeah, it would ease the transition back into civilian life. Be a weekend soldier. The UNSC will be happy to have you in any capacity. So long as it's your choice. Some people I know still can't understand that."

"Thank you so much, sir. I may just look into that."

"Hey, listen, the whole show out there may progress pretty quickly and this might be the last time we meet, so if I don't see you again, take care and don't look back. But keep in touch every once in a while, though, eh?"

Lieutenant Haverson extended his hand, and held back his surprise when Maria lunged forth and hugged him.

"Thank you again, sir. I'll always keep in touch with you."

\* \* \*

><p>The Grand Ballroom was spacious, extravagant. Maria could hear her footfalls echo across the marbled, hemispherical expanse. The lavish, lengthy carpets sprawled the flanks of the main aisle, the only objects dampening any sound. Presently, the area was vacant. Ten minutes to go until the room filled up with people.<p>

She proceeded to the front row of seating and rehearsed the procedures in her mind. She'd pace to the side, ascend the small stairway, march across the stage and greet her presenter—a four-star fleet admiral no less. She'd then standby as her military service was summed up in front of all those spectating in the crowds. Hundreds had gathered outside. Even more would tune in via the media networks for this historic event, the first of its kind.

After the oratory, she'd face the fleet admiral, accept the commander's token, render salute, then turn to face her audience. After some words of her choice, she'd pace away from the ceremony in solitude.

An hour-long ritual concluding a life of service.

After a few more brief moments of reflection, Maria stood, and the



crowds poured in.

\* \* \*

><p><em><strong>1.5 months earlier...<strong>\_

\*\*0930 Hours, May 21, 2547 (Military Calendar)/  
><strong>\*\*Sol System, Earth, UNSC HighComm Facility Bravo-6\*\*

"So everything is in place?" Admiral Jones asked.

"Yes, sir." the Vice Admiral promptly answered. "It's officially public as of today."

Jones sighed, now reclining his high-backed chair. He paused to lock eyes harder with her, signaling the magnitude of his concern.

"Directive Nine-Thirty?"

"Intact. She gets an honorable discharge with medical retirement and free transport to Earth with a Purple Heart. Everyone inside and outside the program has been briefed that she is \_not \_being discharged under any sole survivorship and that it was just a clerical error, mixed up personnel files and such. Those with more intimate knowledge received a different sort of briefing, Lieutenant Haverson included. We lose one Spartan in favor of keeping the others' deaths a secret. It's done."

"Very well. And what of the good Lieutenant?"

"Awaiting further instruction at Reach. After arranging Zero-Six-Two's outprocessing, he'll rendezvous with one of our field agents for escort and begin new assignment under Jacob Keyes' command."

Admiral Jones shook his head and smiled weakly. "I hate close calls. We barely got out of this in one piece, Margaret. It could've been so much worse, though. It could have been a \_catastrophe\_, but you handled it gracefully. Extremely well played."

"Thank you, sir."

"We need to make sure it all holds together. What's the reception like so far from the mass media?"

"It's as I told you." She offered a smile. "The people are eating this up. They're much more hopeful. I've been told financial markets are rallying higher than anytime since the fall of Jericho. "

Jones nodded, sitting erect again. "\_Excellent\_. Let's play this up a bit. Talk to me about how to use this good publicity to our advantage. The UNSC sorely needs it. In my mind, the next step is to generate a ceremony. There needs to be fanfare and plenty of it. None of this can give off any hint that Spartans aren't invincible. Let's hear some ideas."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>1100 Hours, July 7, 2547 (Military Calendar)

><strong>\*\*Epsilon Eridani System, Planet Reach, Reach Military

Complex

>Camp Hathcock, Grand Ballroom of the Military  
Services<strong>

Maria could hear the murmur of the crowds as they filed in and took their seats further aft. It was just a resonant hum from where she stood.

She went over the procedure in her mind once more. In the middle of her rehearsal, she felt a soft hand on her shoulder. She turned to see Lieutenant Haverson once more and smiled. "Hey, sir. I was worried you were already gone."

"You kidding? I couldn't miss this. Look, not a lot of time," he checked his timepiece, "so I just wanted to say good luck in all you do from here on out. They're going to move you pretty quickly once you're done, so this is it. No more of my ugly mug. Someone from ONI reviewed your speech notes and they approved, so you should be just fine if you stick to the script. Remember to look me up later if you need any intel or want back in on some action. I've got a few good connections back at Earth."

"Where will you be?"

"Wherever the UNSC needs me."

"Well, I know that. Where will you be here and now?"

"I'll be in the crowds." he nodded. "Purple Heart looks good on you, by the way." he chided playfully, pointing at the ribbon among the many over her torso. "See you around, Maria."

The Lieutenant turned and parted his way into the crowds, which soon overshadowed the short junior officer.

\* \* \*

><p>"Such heroism and selflessness spanning her countless battles will always reside at the highest echelon of our combat heritage. Let us all cast off into any conflict knowing in our hearts that the future of humankind is assuredly protected when it is in the midst of our Spartans. Maria has served with the utmost of honor and distinction. Her actions reflect great credit upon herself and the United Nations Space Command."<p>

The Admiral spoke the words loudly and slowly, the chamber booming with his surety. He had the entire speech memorized, never once glancing at teleprompters near the periphery for the preceding fifteen minutes.

"This illustrious history as a vastly dedicated and now-celebrated soldierâ€"among the first of her kindâ€"serves as the example toward which we look to during these times of great struggle. Now, today, we look to Spartan Zero-Six-Two's example in her time of peace to come. I now give the floor to Maria, Spartan Zero-Six-Two."

On queue, Maria right-faced, strode to the periphery then up the stairs and across the stage toward the Admiral awaiting her at the podium. She halted in front of him, returning his smile.

Numerous hovering cameras produced a cacophony of shutter pulses as a slight amount of measured applause filled the room, sloping off as the two above enacted the ritual.

He extended a hand. As she shook it, he passed to her a thick, heavy coin between their grasp. Rather than look it over, she held it there in her closed fist. After they both withdrew, she passed the coin to her other hand, snapped her heels together and threw up a swift salute, which the Admiral then proudly returned with another smile. He then about-faced and paced away and out of the chamber.

Maria held there for a few seconds, collecting her thoughts.

She left-faced toward the massive crowd that sprawled out from left to right and back to front. There were many more than she previously noticed. There was not a single empty space in sight. Most of the occupants were forced to stand, overcrowded together, the sea of people reaching past the outer sanctum and beyond.

She eased her stance and began.

"Thank you all for coming. I never thought I'd be here in front of crowds like this. Spartans don't just suddenly receive orders to retire. But it seems it's my time. I'm very proud of what I've done with the others. Over the years since we first joined we trained to never lose to the Covenant, and we never have. Spartans are the protectors of humanity. I'm honored to have lived up to that commitment. I will continue to do so in any capacity I can. And in my heart I believe that one day all of us will share victory in this War."

The crowds roared with cheer and applause. Maria took it all in.

"Room, tench-hut!"

A man in full mess dress impulsively called the entire ballroom to attention, the impromptu command echoing. Every spectator currently wearing any military uniform snapped to attention, their bodies appearing as statues. The unrehearsed gesture caught Maria off-guard, but she nonetheless appreciated their spontaneity. She quickly assumed the position of attention as well a second later. The man then shouted, "Present arms!"

As one, the mass of them saluted.

Maria saluted back.

"Order arms!" he again commanded.

Maria nodded once their salute dropped, wondering what to say next. She sensed a unity among the room after their display of admiration and felt the moment complete. She right-faced toward the exit.

As she walked down the stage and toward her off-world transport awaiting outside, she looked again for the Lieutenant's face, scanning the expansive crowd. Even with her keen, enhanced eyesight, she couldn't find him. She smiled anyway, hoping he'd see it.

She had the gut feeling that this day would be the last she'd ever

know of the planet called Reach that had such a special place in her heart.

End  
file.